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Becoming an Intercultural Mediator: A Longitudinal Study of Residence Abroad

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The 'Year Abroad' is a requirement of all students of languages in Higher Education in Britain to spend an academic year in a country or countries where the languages they are learning are spoken. This article draws on research with a cohort of students during the Year and ten years later to examine the long-term learning involved. The research methodology was based on in-depth interviews and narrative theory. The data were analysed in terms of the development of intercultural competence discernible in the interviews undertaken ten years after the experience. It was found that the participants who profited most from the Year were those who had a degree of 'tertiary socialisation' before they left, and that this continued to be a significant part of their private and professional lives.

The Year Abroad Continuation Study

The Year Abroad (YA) is a peculiarly British phenomenon. No other higher education system has a requirement for students of foreign languages to spend one year, a quarter of the course of study, in one or more foreign countries where the language(s) they are studying are spoken natively. It is for this reason that we shall use the term YA rather than the more generic phrases such as 'residence abroad' or 'study abroad'. In many countries study abroad or residence abroad for students of languages and for others in higher education is recommended but not obligatory.

The study presented here a continuation study as a follow-up to a previous investigation of the nature of the YA experience and the learning that can result from this particular kind of sojourn abroad (Alred, 1998, 2000; Byram & Alred, 1996). Students interviewed ten years previously, before and after their sojourn abroad as teaching assistants, were studied again.¹

The previous study provided an understanding of the experience of the YA from the students' perspective, British students in France and French students in England. A major focus was the development of knowledge of the culture of the host society and the interaction of that knowledge with the circumstances of the residence. These two aspects were linked by students' capacity to adapt to living abroad and the consequences for personal development. A series of booklets was produced as aids to students and their advisers/mentors preparing for the YA (Byram, 1992; Byram & Alred, 1993a, b).

The findings were positive: students were challenged, generally enjoyed their sojourn and reported extensive cultural learning. By the end of the year, an initial emphasis on language *per se* had given way to attention to the use of language in social exchange and intercultural mediation. Experiences were varied and several described the YA as a major episode in their lives, affecting self-understanding and outlook on life. Many also reported marked changes in self-perception, personal development and maturity.

Such significant learning whilst living and working abroad – changes in self-concept, attitudes and behaviour – is conceived in this study in terms of ‘intercultural competence’ (Byram, 1997), defined as ‘the ability to behave appropriately in intercultural situations, the affective and cognitive capacity to establish and maintain intercultural relationships and the ability to stabilise one’s self identity while mediating between cultures’ (Jensen *et al.*, 1995: 41). Although students remained, in some respects, on the margins of the foreign society, nonetheless they conformed to certain institutional expectations which challenged their taken-for-granted understanding. The experience became a process of temporary re-socialisation into a foreign culture and its practices and beliefs.

This study after ten years aimed to reveal the long-term significance of this process by re-interviewing as many of the British students as could be traced, and our research questions attempted to elicit participants’ own understanding of the significance of the YA. Our questions were:

- In what terms do former students give meaning to the experience of living abroad in a European country ten years earlier?
- Have they developed careers or ways of life that draw upon what they learned during the YA?
- How are the effects of the YA manifest in their lives in terms of the qualities inherent in intercultural competence?

In this account, for reasons of space and because it offers another perspective on the concept of ‘the intercultural stance’ (Kramsch, 1999) and the ‘intercultural speaker’ (Byram & Zarate, 1997), we shall concentrate on the third question. The concept of thirdness and being intercultural has been developed by ourselves and others and is beginning to win acceptance but needs further empirical support.

Intercultural Competence and Tertiary Socialisation

The model of intercultural competence used to guide the analysis, to look for evidence of specific attitudes, skills and knowledge, was worked out in detail in an earlier publication (Byram, 1997). In brief it has five elements:

The first two are *preconditions* for (successful) intercultural/interlingual interaction:

- *attitudes*: relativise self and value other; suspend belief in own and disbelief in other’s behaviours, beliefs and values (de-centre) [*savoir être*]
- *knowledge*: of own and other’s behaviours, beliefs and values; of how each is seen by other (le regard croisé) – comparative methods [*savoirs*].

The next are the necessary skills:

- of *interpreting and relating* ‘documents’ / ‘texts’ based on existing knowledge and attitudes [*savoir comprendre*]
- of *discovering* (in own time or in interaction) new behaviours, beliefs and values [*savoir apprendre*]
- of *interacting* in real time based on other preconditions and skills [*savoir faire*] (this is not the only aim for language and culture teaching: *savoir faire* is not always needed by learners)

and in an educational setting:

- the responsibility of the teacher to develop 'critical cultural awareness' [*savoir s'engager*].

A person with these qualities – to some degree since there is no notion of 'perfection' implied here – we have called an 'intercultural speaker'. The phrase 'intercultural *speaker*' was given this particular name, with the emphasis on speaking, for two reasons. First it was necessary to allude to and distance the new concept from the concept of the 'native speaker' which is familiar in the domain of language teaching and has been posited as the model to which foreign/second language learners should aspire. Second it was considered necessary to make explicit the link between intercultural *competencies* and linguistic *competencies*, especially if the concept was to have any impact on foreign language teaching, since the concept of competence has become widely accepted. However, a second name could have been used, that of the 'intercultural mediator', which would have given more emphasis to the individual's potential for social action rather than to the competencies acquired as a consequence of teaching and learning.

In the context at issue here, the second option will be taken because much of what will be described is social action in which the various aspects of intercultural and linguistic competence remain implicit. This is largely a consequence of the data we have. Because the data are the accounts by informants themselves, they describe what they do rather than analysing the competencies on which their actions rely. In fact their awareness of the precise nature of their competencies is limited and only begins to develop as a consequence of being asked to become reflective and analytical during their interview. We shall speak then of the 'intercultural mediator' or simply the 'mediator' and 'mediation'.

The second key concept for our analysis is 'tertiary socialisation' and its relationship to primary and secondary socialisation.

In their classic discussion of primary and secondary socialisation, Berger and Luckmann (1966: 150–151) describe these as follows:

The comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or sector of it. Primary socialisation is the first socialisation an individual undergoes in childhood, through which he becomes a member of society. Secondary socialisation is any subsequent process that inducts an already socialised individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society.

They then go on to refer to other societies but do not develop the point:

We may leave aside here the special question of the acquisition of knowledge about the objective world of societies other than the one of which we first became a member, and the process of internalising such a world as reality – a process that exhibits, at least superficially, certain similarities with both primary and secondary socialisation, yet is structurally identical with neither.

For the theory of language and culture learning, this remark is tantalising and subsequently Byram (1990) and Doyé (1992) have developed the concept of 'tertiary socialisation' to explain the process of induction into another society. In

essence, the argument is that as learners are confronted by another language and the concepts it embodies, they find some concepts which are incompatible with those acquired in primary and secondary socialisation. Even in the early stages of language learning, the conceptualisation of time, for example, may well be different from that of the first language. Some 'key words' are particularly heavily connoted and reveal shared meanings of another society (Agar, 1991; Wierzbicka, 1997). The acquisition of these words and their connotations is not simply a cognitive process but one which can threaten the affective attachment to the world one knows.

Again, Berger and Luckmann (1966: 173 ff.) have an interesting discussion of situations when such threats are extreme. They argue that in any society – or as we would say, cultural group – there has to be a process of constant maintenance of shared reality. This happens through language and in the course of time there will be modification of shared meanings and shared reality. There can also be, for the individual, a transformation of subjective reality through this constant modification and in extreme cases, the individual may undergo a process of switching worlds, of 'alternation' and therefore of re-socialisation. They give the example of religious conversion. Only in very rare cases is this likely to happen through language learning, although examples of extreme exophilia exist.

Intermediate cases of partial transformation are more common and Berger and Luckmann exemplify their argument by referring to mobility from one social class to another. Where such mobility creates inconsistencies for the individual as they meet a reality which contrasts with that of primary and early secondary socialisation, they may overcome the inconsistencies by re-interpretation of their past, and those around them may make allowances for the changes they observe in them.

Such processes of partial transformation may also take place in other kinds of mobility, when as with our research participants, the movement takes them literally to another society and another interpretation of the world. In this case the threat to the existing subjective reality is likely to be far greater than that which takes place in the classroom if only because it is constant, with little respite. In the classroom, the new reality is experienced for short periods and learners are immediately returned to their familiar reality. During the YA, learners are surrounded by that other subjective reality as they interact with other social actors and, in accepting their language, are under pressure to accept their reality. Respite is limited, although often learners in this situation find ways of establishing islands of their own reality, by finding others of their own society – 'the ex-pats club' or, in the contemporary world, the Irish pub – or even other outsiders with whom they share at least the sense of being outsiders.

Tertiary socialisation can, according to Doyé (1992), be analysed on three dimensions; the cognitive, the moral and the behavioural. He builds on the presentation of primary and secondary socialisation by Berger and Luckmann and others, to argue that as people meet new cultures and their norms of beliefs, values and behaviours, a relativisation can, and should take place. The 'should' is the recognition that this may not happen without a pedagogic influence because their existing beliefs, values and behaviours are so well entrenched through primary and early secondary socialisation that the individual may not relinquish their own perspective on these issues at all. Where tertiary socialisation takes

place however, it is not that one set of beliefs and schemata are replaced by others but that new beliefs and schemata are held side by side with existing ones, the individual being ready to operate with whichever is relevant in a given context. The same applies to the values of moral socialisation, leading to an ability to recognise and accept other values and where possible, merge them in a universal system of human values. This corresponds to Kohlberg *et al.*'s (1983) post-conventional level of moral socialisation in which the relativity of the norms of one's own society is recognised. Similarly, in the behavioural dimension, the individual acquires new behaviours but, combined with their insight into other schemata and moral values, they do not simply adopt new ways of behaving, but find 'middle ways' of intercultural behaviours with which they and people of another culture feel comfortable – not an easy task but one which a moral and cognitive perspective can facilitate.

This theory of tertiary socialisation was developed to account for the potential effects of foreign language learning, and as a basis for determining what the aims of language teaching should be, and Doyé discusses this in some detail. It can, however, apply elsewhere too. When Berger and Luckmann describe socialisation, they do so as if the individual is born into a homogeneous society all of whose members share the same world. Their reference to leaving aside the acquisition of knowledge about other societies not only brackets out learning about 'foreign societies', i.e. ones which are outside the boundaries of our own, but also misses the opportunity to discuss the complexities of most contemporary societies where there are different cultural groups with conflicting shared meanings and definitions of the world. However, they argue that there are, within a society, differences in social class groups and their interpretations of the world, which lead to different experiences and, in an implicit reference to the power differential, they suggest that lower-class responses to difference vary:

The same lower-class perspective may induce a mood of contentment, resignation, bitter resentment, or seething rebelliousness. Consequently, the lower-class child will not only come to inhabit a world greatly different from that of an upper-class child, but may do so in a manner quite different from the lower-class child next door. (1966: 151)

Some of this reasoning can be extended to children born into different cultural groups, but whereas the discussion of social class implies that essentially there is a world shared by upper and lower class, with differences only of 'perspective' – a view which is debatable in itself – when a child is born into a multicultural society, they are likely to meet conflicting interpretations of the world. This begins particularly as they are inducted into new sectors of that society during secondary socialisation. In primary socialisation they are inducted into the shared meanings, values and behaviours of the cultural group to which their family belongs but as they meet new mediators of the world, new significant others in charge of secondary socialisation, they are likely to meet new shared meanings which conflict with what they have learnt in the family, in primary socialisation.

We would argue, therefore, that the concept of tertiary socialisation can be applied to processes which happen within the same society but in the encounter with other worlds than those acquired during primary socialisation. We shall see

from our data that some of our research participants appear to have experienced this kind of tertiary socialisation.

Methods and Analysis

The use of semi-structured interviews in the previous study was extended by drawing on narrative theory (Polkinghorne, 1995; Thomas, 1995) and giving emphasis to the narrative character of interview data. In-depth interviews having two phases were carried out:

- (1) Narrative generation. The interview began with an open 'generative narrative question' (Flick, 1998), inviting interviewees to tell the story of their lives around the focus of the YA, followed by more specific questions to further explore and clarify aspects of the narrative. This was followed by a 'balancing' phase of questioning to yield statements of the overall significance of the YA. A digest of the interviewee's interview from the previous research was used by the interviewer to prompt questions.
- (2) Thematic phase. Interviewees were asked for their perceptions of the YA as an educational experience, and their learning from it, in terms of personal development, careers and ways of life. Following Chase (1995), the questions were adapted in the light of the narrative quality of the interview.

This was, therefore, an open process with no questions determined in advance, an 'unstructured' interview. This strategy provided rich data, the phases being complementary and not chronologically distinct, and the data were analysed for the purposes of this account by using the elements of the definition of the intercultural mediator/speaker as the framework for classifying elements of interviewees' accounts of their experience.

Of the 30 British former interviewees, 16 had replied to an invitation to be interviewed again after 7 years, and 15 had accepted. In the event, ten years on, it was not possible to trace additional former students, and some of those originally interested changed their minds or could not be re-contacted. As a consequence, a total of 12 interviews were conducted, one by email. The latter is necessarily of a different quality and this is acknowledged in the data analysis. The sample included one male.

Interviewees were interviewed at their home address, or a negotiated venue, for example the place of work, by the authors of this article. One person normally resident abroad was interviewed during a visit to the UK. The interviews began in March 1999 and were completed in October, 2000. The interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours. They were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The Development of Intercultural Competence in the YA

Tertiary socialisation from an early age

The clearest indications of the effects of tertiary socialisation are to be found in our data when someone learnt another language and lived in a bilingual/bicultural environment from an early age. Lynn had lived in Wales since the age of four and describes the awareness of other languages this brought:

If I had been living in somewhere like Birmingham – no Birmingham isn't a good example because you have a multicultural society there – but Winchester, you wouldn't necessarily be faced with the realisation that English isn't the only language – whereas in Wales everywhere you go everything is in both languages. (Lynn, p. 11)

A similar experience is described by Alice, also brought up in Wales, who links the experience more explicitly with becoming a linguist:

I think I've always enjoyed languages, 'cause in Wales you start languages in primary school and, you know, you play Welsh dot lotto, bingo, when you're little, so you're growing up with the language and I think I always enjoyed languages and enjoyed Welsh. (Alice, p. 12)

She goes on to describe this as an aptitude for languages which appeared in her enjoyment of French from the start. She attributes this to learning Welsh from an early age and uses the term 'confidence' which is often used also to describe the YA:

I think because, having learnt Welsh from an early age, I think it gives you a bit of confidence in learning languages – you get the idea because it's just second nature. (Alice, p. 12)

Here she relates the notion of confidence explicitly to language learning but others, when referring to the YA, use it to include a more general sense of confidence in the experience of otherness and the sense of linguistic confidence is interrelated with cultural and intercultural confidence.

In other cases, informants were brought up in situations more like 'Winchester' than 'Birmingham' or 'Wales', to use Lynn's categories, but this does not necessarily lead to the monoculturalism which she implies. Elizabeth is from Cheshire which, she says, 'is not very multicultural at all' but where the experience of otherness started early:

I started going to France when I was eleven.

[I: That was the first time you came across someone who didn't speak the same language]

No, because this exchange had been going on in the village I come from for years and I was always part of the village, and my parents had friends who were abroad, and my father used to work with people in Switzerland and Germany – so I'd always come across people – and I think, sort of, my parents are very welcoming people – I never remember feeling that feeling that I see in people, that closing up when there's another language spoken, or somebody of another culture in the conversation, or whatever, that sort of inability to accept or just – it's not just that – it's a lack of confidence isn't it, in yourself to give and to include somebody. (Elizabeth, p. 9)

Here again there is the use of the word 'confidence' but not with reference to linguistic competence. Here it is a confidence in self but the definition of self includes the *savoir être* which is crucial to intercultural competence. 'Confidence' is thus an indicator of *savoir être* but also an indicator of *savoir apprendre*, as she

demonstrates when talking about the multicultural classes she teaches in primary school:

I mean I find it really interesting, finding out about other people's cultures – and, you know, as I say, you know, when I first started teaching, obviously, you know, when you get your class of children, that you've got children from different minority groups, different religions etc. but it's, again, it's that confidence I was talking about before – you've got to have the confidence to get out there and find out about it. (Elizabeth, p. 10)

In the final words here, we have a good definition of *savoir apprendre*. Elizabeth goes on to make the point, that the YA confirms existing processes of tertiary socialisation, that 'upbringing' is crucial, irrespective of time abroad:

I wonder whether it's my upbringing rather than anything to do with spending time abroad, I don't know. (Elizabeth, p. 9)

Our view is that these two factors are complementary and that 'time abroad' is an opportunity for developing not just attitudes, *savoir être*, but also the social action of the mediator, *savoir faire*.

We have seen up to this point examples of early experience of otherness, of other languages, of other people and postulated that these initiated the process of tertiary socialisation. Where such experience does not precede the YA, the effect is different. Ann is someone for whom the YA was a major change. She saw her university as a relatively safe place to go for someone 'who'd never been out of Bradford much'. It was 'a nice secure environment, not too far from home', whereas other universities which offered her a place were too 'scary', 'so I suppose at eighteen 'X university' was the only place I could possibly go really'. (Ann, p. 9). So the YA was quite a big jump, 'getting out of the safe, secure environment, I suppose, for the first time being launched abroad, not really a clue what I'm doing' but she enjoyed it perhaps for that reason: 'perhaps you need a push to actually go and do something a bit out of the ordinary'. She was, however, fortunate in that she was 'adopted' by a French family, 'I was like their replacement daughter for the year' and she enjoyed the year:

Yes, I mean I really enjoyed it – one day, just walking down the road, thinking goodness me, I'm really happy, it's fantastic. (Ann, p. 10)

However, though she still visits her French family, she refers to other experiences as 'scary' and feels torn between wanting to go elsewhere and fear of travel:

I've never been to a country where I don't speak the language and I'm sort of contemplating going to Italy or something but I don't speak Italian and it would be very scary because I wouldn't know what they're saying to me – so I'm not so sure about that actually – so I'm thinking of going with a friend of mine to Australia in January next year – we're supposed to have gone – but again – that I don't really – it's such a long way – I don't travel very far you see – and also frightened to actually travel anywhere. (Ann, p. 15)

The fear of not understanding what people are saying is perhaps what Elizabeth called 'closing up when there's another language spoken'. It can be argued that Ann did not develop as far, that her process of tertiary socialisation involved

initiation into another culture but did not lead to the *savoir être* which is part of intercultural competence. In fact, she acquired a second family, perhaps in a second experience of secondary socialisation:

They made the year for me – without them – I did lots of other things – I acted in the school play, I was part of the choir and other people invited me out and I was friends with people I met at school – so there were other people there – so it would have been okay – but they were sort of providing the fundamental basis as a family do – you know, you’ve got friends and everything, but you’ve got your family there as a stable, solid background, and they provided that for me for that year – so yes, it did make all the difference. (Ann, p. 16)

So Ann’s tertiary socialisation remained incomplete. Furthermore, although she returned to France for three months on finishing her university course, she then returned home and worked in her mother’s firm for several years. The need for a home and family seems very strong.

It is striking that, in those cases where tertiary socialisation was continued, it was often with the support of a ‘family’. As Ann’s case shows, the integration into a family does not necessarily lead to tertiary socialisation but others needed the support of a family, or similar social unit, in the process of further tertiary socialisation.

A very important function of being invited into a family is in the first period of the YA. Students arrive in a different country knowing they are going to live there, not just travel as tourists:

I think having, you know, sort of being able to say that you have actually lived in a different country – I always think it, when people say that, you know, ‘I’ve lived abroad’ – you think, oh well, you know, that – and you respect them, sort of thing – so, you know, I’m pleased with myself really. (Alice, p. 9)

In this situation being invited into someone’s home can be crucial to the sense of living in a country and not just visiting it:

When I first got to France, I had nowhere to live and a lady from the school invited me to stay at her house – and she was in the process of getting a divorce, so it was so nice of her to do that – and also I could feel it was a bit much, you know – but it was wonderful and I’ve got really happy memories of her because, you know, she just made me feel that it was okay and I had somewhere to live – because that was quite a worrying thing – you don’t have much money – you don’t have nowhere to live. (Yvonne, p. 11)

Yvonne also became part of another family when she moved into more permanent accommodation and through them met other people whom she has visited since. Elizabeth, too, who found it quite hard to be away from home – ‘intermittently I got quite down about being away from home, but then I always have done and still when I leave home, it upsets me’ (p. 7) – was supported by a family known from a school exchange, and met another group of people whom she still visits.

The 'family' can also be created by the circumstances. In Lynn's case, a number of young people of different nationalities found themselves living together and she describes this as a 'family unit':

People of our age were no longer in the town – they had all gone off to university – or we didn't really know people of that age there, so we had to rely on each other to do things, entertainment, just generally living together – we didn't know anybody else – we were all in the same situation – so, yes, we did things together – it was our little family unit really. (Lynn, p. 15)

This prevented loneliness and the risk of feeling unhappy as a consequence, which was Sylvia's lot, although even this can be put in positive terms:

Maybe because there was nothing to do, very little to do, I did learn to enjoy my own company and I will quite happily now sit by myself and not always crave company. (Sylvia, p. 10)

'Family' can, therefore, be simply a means of support and overcoming loneliness but it can also be a location for tertiary socialisation if it is in fact a French family rather than an international 'family unit', although even this probably furnishes opportunities for experiences parallel to and challenging those of secondary socialisation.

Being a mediator

Informants perceive their career options as falling into two broad categories: teaching and others. At the time of the interviews, Sylvia, Yvonne, Elizabeth and Carol were teaching, Lynn, Alice and Amanda were considering it as a second career. Karen was teaching her own and others' children at home, having been a primary teacher. John was in accountancy, Sarah in a building society, Ann in marketing, Lynn in a law firm and Alice and Amanda were full-time mothers.

It can be argued that teaching foreign languages is one of the jobs which incorporates mediation to the highest degree. The foreign language teacher understands the foreign language and culture as well as that of their pupils, and their task is to help their pupils understand that otherness. Sylvia does not feel this has to be a part of the task, that it is not even required by the English national curriculum, that what is needed is the ability to 'communicate' which she appears to understand as the ability to speak the foreign language for purposes of social transactions without needing to *know* much of anything about other cultures. This is, in fact, a view which is widely held but particularly striking in that it allows Sylvia to continue to teach French even though she does not like France because she hated her YA.

Yvonne, however, ensures that classroom language teaching is accompanied by other activities:

We had an exchange to L [...]. We go in Year 12 – we go to Paris and visit, we visit companies really and do a tourist visit – but this year they're going to stay with families so they do speak French as well – we found it hard to have, we used to have a work experience visit but the types of school we were interested in, in France, are very different to our type of schools [...] so we go on a visit now. (Yvonne, p. 3)

There is also a visit to Japan and Yvonne took lessons with her pupils to accompany them. She is thus still very much the linguist mediating the experience of otherness for pupils. She also keeps direct links between her YA and her work through former pupils:

I think it would be just terrible if people didn't go – I know, I mean, what I was saying to you on the phone about some of my students have come back to ask me – I've had three students come in the same week to say please can we talk to you about the year abroad – and it was lovely and I was really touched by that, because they left two years ago but they want to be prepared – and they've written to me since being there and, you know, phoned me up at Christmas to say how things went – and, you know, I think they must be going through all the same things I went through. (Yvonne, p. 18)

She goes on to explain how she persuaded one girl to go despite her fears, ensuring she was met and looked after by using her contacts in France. It is thus evident that the YA is still a significant part of her professional life and her role as mediator. However, she contrasts this with the job in retailing which she took on graduating:

I was so bored and it was all about money, you know, wasn't interesting at all and I just thought, I know I'll be a teacher and I was so lucky because I just immediately enjoyed it. (Yvonne, p. 10)

Although she works in the primary school sector, Elizabeth too still thinks of herself as a linguist. She wrote a dissertation on teaching foreign languages in primary education during her training and has tried to have this realised in the schools where she has worked. However, she also sees her identity as a linguist having a direct impact on all her work with children:

And I found actually working with young children, I'm very much a linguist – it's still, sort of, using appropriate language with young children – I may not be a foreign linguist but my language skills and ways of putting things across to children to enable them to understand it – it's at the fore of my mind all the time when I'm talking to children – and I'm sure that's coming from having learnt languages myself and, you know, maybe not so much through the serious thing at university and doing my 'A' levels etc. – but just through the way I obviously think about things and maybe that's why I became a linguist in the first place, I don't know. (Elizabeth, p. 3)

As she says, it is difficult to ascribe this to any particular part of her education and up-bringing. She too had probably experienced tertiary socialisation quite young, having lived with her family in Belgium and the United States. She may not think that her primary school language work relates to her learning of foreign languages post-16 but it can, nonetheless, be a significant factor.

Those who are not teachers may not be as aware of their mediating role but there is evidence that it is part of their professional life to differing degrees depending on needs and opportunities. Of those who are not teachers, Lynn is the one who has most opportunity to act as mediator. She returned abroad on graduation 'as a result of my year abroad in France [...]. I didn't particularly want

to stay in England – I didn't want to go into teaching, I didn't want to go into banking or all the other things which seemed to be relevant at the time'. (p. 1–2) So she made a distinction between teaching and other careers. However, in the category 'abroad' she had no specific idea of 'what I wanted to do', so she found a post-graduate course in Brussels and then a job in a law firm, where she still was, at the time of the interview, working as office manager, although, in fact, on maternity leave. The law firm is American, with attorneys and staff of various nationalities, working in a Belgian administrative context. So she describes herself as 'very much the middle person trying to placate the two (the attorneys and the staff)' and she sees her success in this partly in terms of her nationality:

I think of the office managers that I know in Brussels – most of them are Belgian – of the other American law firms – whereas I'm English and I think I work better with the attorneys and partly in terms of age and experience. I find nowadays that as I get older the staff get younger [...] I'm looking after people, listening to people – that sort of quality, there, of being unbiased and there to help one side and to work with the others on the other side. (Lynn, p. 3)

She also identifies her knowledge of cultural difference as significant and here her *savoir être* emerges:

I'm certainly conscious of explaining to others that the Germans are a little bit more abrupt – we did have one case with a Spanish attorney, but she's very easy-going, very nice to get on with, but one person said, she never says please, she never says thank you – and I said I noticed that, I have a Spanish friend, it's sort of a different cultural thing. (Lynn, p. 4)

She goes on to tell the person about her own socialisation into saying please and thank you and the effect this has on one's expectations and also the effects of people using English as a lingua franca: 'you may all be speaking English, but you're not an English speaker – it may be a Flemish woman I'm talking to – you're not English speaking, she's not English speaking, you know, there's bound to be misunderstandings because you're both using a foreign language' (p. 4). Here then the linguist mediator with an awareness of linguistic and cultural phenomena in intercultural interaction is clearly evident. It is not possible to attribute this capacity for mediation directly to the YA but Lynn does say that she saw her role as an assistant above all in terms of mediation and, when asked what else comes to mind, she says the YA was 'the first experience of living with other people with different nationalities, where I first lived with a Spanish friend and a German friend' (p. 13). The reference to Spanish and German again may be just coincidental but it shows that she had, from the YA onwards, a life with mediation at the centre.

Conclusions

We have attempted in this article to use the concepts of 'intercultural mediator' and 'tertiary socialisation' to analyse the individual accounts. We would not claim that generalisations can be drawn from these cases but what is important is that there is evidence here of the significance of the YA, which can only be drawn

from a long-term study such as ours, and that this is the first study of this kind. Analyses which are conducted during and immediately after the Year (cf. Coleman, 1995, 1996) cannot identify these issues at all.

The causal relationship between the YA, prior intercultural learning experience and subsequent seeking for a career with an intercultural potential is doubtless multi-directional. It might also be argued that some other factor, such as 'personality' would be more powerful in explaining prior, during and subsequent experiences. What is clear is that the YA can function as a reference point, a sufficiently bounded and identifiably different experience to serve as a lens through which to consider some current experience, as a force which pushed someone in an unexpected direction, as the moment which created an awareness of otherness and how one relates to it. It can also function in a quite different way, as a confirmation of oneself as belonging 'at home' rather than among others. In both cases, and neither need be evaluated as better or worse than the other, it is the demanding and consuming nature of the YA which makes it such a powerful reference point.

In any society which expects its education system to prepare people for living in an internationalised culture and globalised economy, and also for the interaction between people of different cultures within and across national boundaries, the process of tertiary socialisation and the acquisition of intercultural competence are clearly desirable. Our findings suggest that this can be a significant and long-term effect of the year abroad if the preconditions are established. Already in our first investigation, the counter-effects of falling back on and reinforcing secondary socialisation were evident and we developed an approach which provided a better preparation for the YA in the hope of overcoming this (Roberts *et al.*, 2001). The value of this educational dimension of the YA is not simply measurable in economic and quantitative terms but must be seen as a political decision to commit resources to this experience. What we have shown is that there is a potential in the YA for significant long-term educational gains for the individuals concerned and the political decision would be to consider how these personal gains enhance the quality of the society in which they live. The fact that some of them live outside the United Kingdom means too that politicians themselves would have to take an international perspective and value the effects of British education in other societies, in other parts of Europe and beyond.

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Notes

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